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TAGS: GM PGOV PREL

SUBJECT: LEFT PARTY CHAIRMAN OSKAR LAFONTAINE BIDS FAREWELL  
TO BERLIN LEAVING HIS PARTY IN LEADERSHIP TURMOIL

Classified By: MINISTER COUNSELOR FOR POLITICAL AFFAIRS GEORGE GLASS FO  
R REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

OSKAR LAFONTAINE QUILTS NATIONAL POLITICS

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¶11. (C) Left Party Co-Chairman Oskar Lafontaine's January 23 resignation from the Bundestag and as party chair due to his battle with cancer has created an immediate leadership vacuum in The Left Party, leaving no one of similar stature to take over. His announcement has fueled speculation about the party's future -- including its viability without Lafontaine and about who will ultimately step in. With more than a tinge of Schadenfreude, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which has lost many left wing voters to The Left Party hopes that Lafontaine's resignation will exacerbate pre-existing east-west tensions within the party. Lafontaine's retreat from national politics may also remove an impediment towards more cooperation between the SPD and Left Party, since it was the SPD's hostility towards Lafontaine that -- to a large extent -- divided the two parties in the past. (Note: Lafontaine split off from the SPD and founded The Left Party against then-SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder's welfare reforms in 2005. End note.)

WHO CAN FILL OSKAR'S SHOES?

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¶12. (C) Four potential successors have quickly emerged as the front-runners for the chairmanship: Left Party Caucus Deputy Chief Klaus Ernst, Bundestag Vice President and MdB Petra Pau, MdB Gesine Loetzsch and MdB Dagmar Enkelmann. Party Caucus Leader Gregor Gysi has taken center stage in managing the selection of Lafontaine's political heir, but the question of succession is complicated by the fact that The Left Party's current Secretary-General Dietmar Bartsch -- after a political fall-out with Oskar Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi -- decided not to run for re-election at the party's national convention in May leaving a critical opening for his position too. Thuringian Left Party Chairman Bodo Ramelow's decision not to run for re-election to the Party's Executive Committee removes another figure who could excite the party faithful at the national level. Party stalwarts like Lothar Bisky, Bartsch, and Bodo Ramelow have all been side-lined at a time when their national presence will be sorely missed.

¶13. (C) Lafontaine can now infamously take credit for being the only political leader in German history to bring two major parties to the brink of political disaster. With his resignation as SPD Party Chairman and Finance Minister in 1999 and his decision to leave the party in 2005 over the SPD's controversial Hartz IV welfare agenda reforms, Lafontaine has now added The Left Party to his list of political casualties. With Lafontaine's departure, The Left

Party loses its foremost personality and the man whose ideas became his party's political foundation. Lafontaine's return to state politics (Saarland) leaves the Left Party further exposed to divisive east-west debates about how the party's ideological soul should be defined. The fear for the Left Party faithful must be that their party will become mired in leadership troubles at a time when the CDU/FDP-CSU coalition is perceived to be weak by the German public.

¶4. (C) While the SPD might hope to benefit from Lafontaine's demise, it is not certain that it will be able to extract any significant political capital from the Left Party's current leadership crisis, especially at a time when the SPD is struggling to define its *raison d'être*. It is also possible that public speculation about future cooperation between the SPD and The Left Party could actually damage the SPD, which has tried to boost its bona fides with the center.

¶5. (SBU) Poloffs will attend The Left Party's New Year's reception at the Bundestag on January 25 to learn more about the leadership struggle.

DELAWIE